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The “Sons of God” as a Polemic against Royal Immortality: A Philological and Literary Comparison of Genesis 6:1–4 and the Epic of Kirta

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There is little doubt that the primeval saga of Genesis 6:1–4 would have an astounding exegetical and theological significance to the Bible’s metanarrative if interpreters could only decipher its content. For at least two millennia, exegetes have debated the intention of this pericope.¹ This biblical narrative briefly describes humanity’s population increase (v. 1), a cryptic mention of “the sons of God” taking the “daughters of men” as wives (v. 2), then the resultant limitation on humanity’s mortality (v. 3), and an ambiguous reference to the “Nephilim” (v. 4). F. B. Huey lists several scholars who label the passage either as “strange,” “unintelligible,” or “unsolved.”² As John Walton explains, biblical narratives assume ancient sensitivities that are unfamiliar to the modern reader. In order to discern these enigmatic texts, researchers must investigate other ancient Near Eastern works for literary parallels.³

The purpose of this article is to identify the function of the “sons of God” in the literary context of Genesis 6:1–4.⁴ The article will first present presuppositions to the research, as well as the importance of Ugaritic literature in biblical studies. The investigation will then present a comparative study with the Ugaritic Epic of Kirta and a potential new theory regarding the Genesis pericope. It concludes by suggesting that literary parallels reveal the Epic of Kirta is potentially a close paradigm for understanding the function of the Genesis passage. The specific sin of the “sons of God” may not have been unsanctioned marriages, adultery, polygamy, or rape. Rather, the biblical account may have acted as a polemic against the belief that divine kings obtained immortality

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¹See Robert C. Newman “The Ancient Exegesis of Genesis 6:2, 4,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 13.

²F. B. Huey Jr., “Are the ‘Sons of God’ in Genesis 6 Angels? Yes,” in *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood*, ed. R. F. Youngblood (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 184.

³John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39–40.

⁴Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV). This article follows the traditional translation of “sons of God” as found in the ESV, NASB, and NIV translations. This phrase can also be translated as “sons of Elohim,” using a transliteration of the Hebrew word for “God.”

through marriage and reproduction, which exacerbated Yahweh's decision to eradicate humanity and to demonstrate the finiteness of these so-called god-kings.

I. Research Presuppositions

1. The Unity of Genesis 6:1–4

The passage in Genesis 6:1–4 briefly describes humanity's population increase (v. 1), a cryptic mention of "the sons of God" taking the "daughters of men" as wives (v. 2), then the resultant limitation on humanity's mortality (v. 3), and an ambiguous reference to the "Nephilim" and "Gibborim" (v. 4). Chris Seeman suggests that the abrupt, fragmentary nature of the text indicates that these four verses existed prior to the formation of the Pentateuch. However, this investigation cannot assume the passage is a Yahwistic (J) redaction or emendation of a foreign myth that was detached from its original context.⁵ Rather, the diachronic approach implemented here will attempt to reconstruct how editors may have accumulated several features of oral or written traditions to construct an interconnected and unified biblical storyline.⁶

Rather, the narrative appears to reflect earlier themes in Genesis of an increase in human depravity, as well as parallels earlier genealogies through word repetition and subject matter. The pericope also displays common motifs with other portions of Genesis, such as trespassing prescribed boundaries (cf. Gen. 3:22; 4:19; 6:2), the denigration of humanity's divine image (cf. 1:27; 6:2–4; 9:6), human ambition to preserve a dynastic legacy (cf. 4:17; 6:4; 9:18; 11:4), and the multiplication of offspring (cf. 1:28; 4:25; 6:1; 9:1).⁷ Thus, any solution to understanding Genesis 6:1–4 must consider the literary context of the passage as it relates to the motifs of the primeval histories.

2. Late Bronze Age Tradition, Date, and Occasion

This research also assumes that the tradition behind Genesis originated in the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BC). Due to the oral-scribal culture of ancient Israel, it is unlikely that

⁵Chris Seeman, "The Watchers Traditions and Gen. 6:1–4 (MT and LXX)," in *The Watchers in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, eds. A. K. Harkins *et al.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 27. John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2nd ed., ICC (Edinburgh: Clark, 1930), 141 states, "The disconnectedness of the narrative is probably due to drastic abridgment either by the original writer or later editors, to whom its crudely mythological character was objectionable, and who were interested in retaining no more than was needful to account for the origin of the giants." For problems and recent controversies with source criticism, see Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (New York: Oxford, 1998).

⁶Cf. Ferdinand Deist, "On Synchronic and Diachronic: wie es eigentlich gewesen," *JNSL* 21, no. 1 (1995): 37–48; Suzanne Boorer, "The Importance of a Diachronic Approach: The Case of Genesis-Kings," *CBQ* 51, no. 2 (1989): 195–208.

⁷See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1A (Dallas: Word, 1987), 136–38; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 321–22; David J. A. Clines, "The Significance of the 'Sons of God' Episode (Genesis 6:1–4) in the Context of the 'Primeval History' (Genesis 1–11)," *JSOT* 13 (1979): 36–38; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, CC, trans. J. J. Scullion (1974; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 368.

Genesis had a singular point of origin. Instead, preexilic Israelites would have attributed authority to the community of tradents who perpetuated aural-living traditions ahead of written documents.⁸ Because Genesis does not appeal to a Mosaic authorship, as well as textual details that require later redactors (cf. Gen. 12:6; 13:7; 14:14), it is likely that subsequent scribes compiled the primeval histories in a later period. This is because the pentateuchal texts lack uniformity in writing style and theme, indicating an extended process of gathering and editing extant documents and oral traditions to create an intentionally hewn metanarrative. Likewise, both internal biblical and extrabiblical evidence associate the Pentateuch with the books of Joshua to Kings, suggesting a composition date during the exilic and postexilic periods (c. 586–332 BC).⁹

Nevertheless, these primeval histories reflect an antiquity that may suggest origination during the Mosaic or pre-Mosaic period, making it possible for Genesis 6:1–4 to reflect the Late Bronze Age. This process of oral transmission does not exclude Moses as a primary tradent, but it is doubtful that he produced Genesis in its current form.¹⁰ Thus, all interpretations of the Genesis pericope should reflect the occasion of the Israelite inhabitation of Canaan during this period. Otherwise, the brief pericope would serve little relevance to the preexilic religion of the original audience.

II. A Brief Survey of Varying Approaches to Genesis 6:1–4

1. The Failure of the Sethite Interpretation

One traditional interpretation views the “sons of God” as descendants of the godly Sethites from Genesis 5, who sin by marrying the wicked Cainites. This view coincides with several Pentateuchal themes, such as the spiritual sonship of Israel (cf. Exod. 4:22; Deut. 14:1), the warnings against marrying nonbelievers (cf. Gen. 24:3–4), and the furtherance of corruption in society.¹¹ However, few contemporary scholars embrace this

⁸For the importance of making an historical distinction between preexilic Israelites and Second Temple Jews, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 8–12. For an examination of oral transmissions in ancient scribal cultures, see Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007); Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (January 1995): 4–11; Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010, repr., 1999), 64–79; John H. Walton and D. Brent Sandy, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Culture and Biblical Authority* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 17–48, 60–61.

⁹For details and a survey of scholarship on the author and final editing of the Pentateuch, see T. Desmond Alexander, “Authorship of the Pentateuch,” in *DOT: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 61–72; Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 38–48.

¹⁰See William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 6–13; Daniel Isaac Block, “Moses and the Pentateuch: An Investigation into the Biblical Evidence,” *AreeJ* 12 (Spring 2012): 6–14; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 574–76; Alexander, “Authorship of the Pentateuch,” 61–72.

¹¹See Mathews, *Genesis 1–11*:26, 329–31.

interpretation because the designation “sons of God” never serves as a collective term for the Sethites. Similarly, the text does not explicitly condemn either the “sons of God” or their marriages.¹² Walton also explains that there is no indication from the genealogies that the Sethites and Cainites remained ethnically diverse or needed to restrain from intermarrying each other.¹³

2. The Failure of the Supernatural Interpretation

A common interpretation is that the “sons of God” are supernatural beings who conjugate with human women. Significantly, the phrase “sons of God” is used elsewhere in the OT as a reference to angels (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; cf. Ps. 29:1; 89:7), while ancient Ugaritic literature identifies the “sons of El” as members of the divine pantheon.¹⁴ Interestingly, however, neither the OT nor the Ugaritic literature describes these “sons” as cohabitating with humans. Nevertheless, this supernatural explanation has the support of the earliest known Jewish interpretation, the Alexandrine text of the Septuagint, Philo, Josephus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Likewise, some early church fathers also understood the passage to mean angels.¹⁵

However, the supernatural explanation does not exist prior to the influence of the Hellenistic period, which was replete with Greek mythologies of gods sexually mingling with human beings. In addition, the lexical base for understanding the “sons of God” is too small to warrant a narrow definition. It is likely that the phrase reflects an idiomatic expression that associated the “son. See Ronald S. Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4,” *JBL* 106, no. 1 (1987): 16; see also Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 140; Clines, “Significance,” 33; H. Haag, “*lā bēn*,” in *TDOT*, rev. ed., ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 2:158. For support of the Sethite view, see Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 329–32. (s) of X” with certain classifications and offices (e.g., “sons of the prophets,” 1 Kings 20:35). Thus, the “sons of God” could be human and still belong to the category of divine representatives, such as human judges and rulers (cf. Exod 21:6; 22:8–9; Ps. 82:1).¹⁶ It is interesting to note that certain textual

¹²See Ronald S. Hendel, “Of Demigods and the Deluge: Toward an Interpretation of Genesis 6:1–4,” *JBL* 106, no. 1 (1987): 16; see also Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 140; Clines, “Significance,” 33; H. Haag, “*lā bēn*,” in *TDOT*, rev. ed., ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 2:158. For support of the Sethite view, see Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 329–32.

¹³John H. Walton, “Sons of God, Daughters of Man,” in *DOT: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 796.

¹⁴See Michael S. Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God,” *BSac* 158, no. 629 (January 2001): 65–8; Terence E. Fretheim, *The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, NIB (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:382; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 139.

¹⁵For a defense of the angelic view, see Willem A. VanGemeren, “The Sons of God in Genesis 6:1–4 (An Example of Evangelical Demythologization?),” *WTJ* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 320–48. Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2015), 92–109, 183–91; Huey, “Sons of God,” 196–204.

¹⁶See John H. Walton, “Are the ‘Sons of God’ in Genesis 6 Angels? No.,” in *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood*, ed. R. F. Youngblood (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), 188–96; see also, *idem*, “Sons of God,” 796.

traditions of the Septuagint translates the phrase “sons of God” as “angels” in Job (*hoi angeloi tou theou*) but does not conclude the same supernatural interpretation for Genesis when it retains the phrase “sons of God” in Greek (*hoi huioi tou theou*).¹⁷

Finally, the supernatural interpretation does not fit the context of Genesis or the contemporary situation of the wandering Israelites. The explanation does not adequately demonstrate why God punishes humanity for the behavior of sinful supernatural beings. Though Cherubim are mentioned once in Genesis 3:24, neither angels nor the concept of a divine council are identified in Genesis in the previous passages. Likewise, the notion that divine beings are sexually active is completely foreign to the Hebrew worldview (cf. Matt. 22:30). This belief would have no contemporary significance to Moses or the original Israelite audience.¹⁸

3. The Failure of Assuming Greek Literary Parallels

In order to defend the supernatural interpretation, critical scholars often see parallels between the “sons of God” and Greek mythology. John Skinner comments that belief in marriages between gods and mortals was common in the Greek “heroic age.” He provides the most comprehensive list of these Greek legends.¹⁹ Ronald Hendel also sees a parallel between the Genesis pericope and the Hesiodic tradition of the Trojan War.²⁰ Significantly, neither author is able to document similar parallels of sex between gods and humans from the ancient Near East. Using Greek literature fails to recognize that classical Greek mythology likely adopted and altered stories from the ancient Near East at a date later than the Mosaic compilation of Genesis.²¹ As Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg remark, scholars must recognize that Greek mythology had its origin in other ancient Mediterranean literature. A proper comparative study should investigate the original source of information rather than its inheritor. In this particular case, Ugaritic literature is a likely progenitor of the Greek “Homeric World.”²²

4. The Failure of Assuming Mesopotamian Parallels

Recognizing the need to look at other ancient Near Eastern literature, several interpreters attempt to identify parallels within the narratives of Mesopotamia. Walton focuses on the Epic of Gilgamesh as a paradigm for interpreting the pericope. He lists several parallels that he believes are noteworthy, such as the semi-divine nature of Gilgamesh, his gigantic stature, and his adulterous actions against women. Gilgamesh also reflects a common theme of searching for immortality among ancient rulers. While he recognizes that the Genesis passage is too vague for an “organic relationship” between the two stories,

¹⁷The Codex Alexandrinus translates Gen. 6:2 as “angels of God (*hoi angeloi tou theou*)”; see Haag, “*תְּבַנָּה*,” 2:157.

¹⁸See Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 326–28; Cline, “Significance,” 34.

¹⁹Skinner, *Genesis*, 140.

²⁰Hendel, “Demigods,” 18–20; cf. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 138.

²¹See Peter C. Craigie, *Ugarit and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 86–87.

²²Cyrus H. Gordon and Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 4th ed. (New York: Norton, 1997), 96, 104.

Walton believes the Genesis account mirrors many of the same elements of Mesopotamian royal motifs.²³

One failing of this comparative study is that Gilgamesh has no philological comparisons to the “sons of God” terminology. Similarly, whereas Genesis distinguishes between “the sons of God” and the “Nephilim,” Walton contradictorily associates Gilgamesh with both. Lastly, Walton attempts to identify the sin of the “sons of God” as either polygamy or adultery. However, the biblical account does not condemn the unions of Genesis 6:2. In fact, to “take a wife” is a standard Hebrew idiom for sanctioned marriages.²⁴ Nevertheless, the cultural and linguistic differences between Israel’s Northwest Semitic beliefs and the Eastern Semitic practices of Mesopotamia limits the latter’s usefulness as a primary resource.²⁵

III. The Primacy of Ugaritic Studies

Rather than isolating only slight parallels to Mesopotamian literature, exegetes should utilize the writings from ancient Ugarit as a primary source of reference. Notably, Ugaritic is the closest culturally and textually to the Hebrew Bible. Both have similar grammar, syntax, and conceptual word meanings, in addition to often indistinguishable religious and socio-cultural beliefs and rituals.²⁶ Hence, Mark Smith explains, “Given that Ugaritic and biblical texts attest so many of the same deities, religious practices, and notions, the Ugaritic texts may be used with caution for religious material in the West Semitic sphere which Israelite tradition inherited.”²⁷ In discussing the primacy of Ugaritic literature, Peter Craigie concludes, “The value of the great mass of written texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia must be considered as secondary with respect to the comparative study of biblical Hebrew literature.”²⁸ Particularly important are the similarities between Ugaritic and Israelite perspectives regarding monarchies, especially relating to the divine parentage and representation of the king.²⁹

Ugarit’s international influence also allowed their writings and belief systems to permeate as far as Egypt, Arabia, Syria, and Palestine.³⁰ The ancient Israelites oftentimes alluded to Ugaritic literature as a reference for their own work. Gordon and Rendsburg state, “The Ugaritic tablets confront us with so many striking literary parallels to the Hebrew Bible that it is universally recognized that the two literatures are variants of one

²³Walton, “Sons of God,” 196–204.

²⁴See Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 140–141; Newman, “Ancient Exegesis,” 30.

²⁵See Craigie, *Ugarit*, 45, 51.

²⁶For details on Israel’s Ugaritic heritage, see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xxix–xxx, 19–31.

²⁷Smith, *Early History of God*, 29–30.

²⁸Craigie, *Ugarit*, 45.

²⁹Wilfred G. E. Watson and Nicolas Wyatt, eds., *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies* (Boston: Brill, 1999), 559.

³⁰Craigie, *Ugarit*, 37–39; see also the discussion on the “international era of the Late Bronze Age” in Hendel, “Demigods,” 23.

Canaanite tradition. To the Hebrew writers, however, the mythology is often little more than a literary background on which to draw for poetic imagery.³¹ They further remark, “Indeed the Hebrew view is to a great extent a conscious reaction against the Canaanite milieu.”³² The numerous textual parallels between Ugaritic literature and the Hebrew Bible suggest that ancient Israelites were, in fact, captivated by much of Ugarit’s views of the divine realm, especially (as it relates to the Gen. pericope) the notion of the Rephaim.³³

IV. A New Paradigm: The Ugaritic Epic of Kirta³⁴

When considering the writings of ancient Ugarit, the Epic of Kirta has striking similarities to the pericope in Genesis 6:1–4.³⁵ Wilfred Watson and Nicolas Wyatt describe the Epic of Kirta as an ancient “patriarchal narrative” written by a scribe named Ilumilki in the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BC). According to Watson and Wyatt, ancient Israel most certainly knew about the contents of the Kirta poem.³⁶ Written on three broken tablets (standardized as KTU 1.14, 1.15, and 1.16), the story describes a monarch named Kirta who is distressed about lacking an heir to his throne.³⁷ The supreme god El instructs Kirta to capture a new bride, Hurriya, from a neighboring king. El then blesses Kirta and Hurriya’s marriage by providing an heir to Kirta’s kingdom. Years later, another god, Asherah, punishes Kirta by making him severely ill for breaking a vow made prior to the marriage. El intervenes to restore Kirta’s health, but the eldest son, Yassib, revolts against Kirta’s reign. The extant poem ends with Kirta condemning his eldest son.³⁸

³¹Gordon and Rendsburg, *Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 88–89.

³²Gordon and Rendsburg, *Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 93.

³³Conrad L’Heureux, “The Ugaritic and Biblical Rephaim,” *HTR* 67, no. 3 (1974): 265–74. For a listing of Ugaritic-biblical parallels, see the massive three volume collection by Loren R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*, vol. 1–2, AnOr 49–50 (Rome: Pontifical, 1972, 1975) and Stan Rummel, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels: The Texts from Ugarit and the Hebrew Bible*, vol. 3, AnOr 51 (Rome: Pontifical, 1981).

³⁴Scholars have traditionally written the name “Kirta” as “Keret.” However, linguistic scholarship has deemed this title the least likely of all the pronunciation possibilities. Kirta’s name has also been vocalized as Karrate, Kuriti, Kurti, and Karta. See Dennis Pardee, “The Kirta Epic,” in *The Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, ed. W. W. Hallo (New York: Brill, 1997), 1:333, n. 3.

³⁵The story of Kirta has been variously categorized as “myth,” “legend,” and “epic.” It may, however, be proper to address the story in a more general fashion, such as simply a “narrative” or “poem”; see Nicolas Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit: The Words of Ilumilki and His Colleagues*, BibSem 53 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1998), 176.

³⁶Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 203–205, 219.

³⁷The standardization of column and line numbers for the Kirta Epic appears in Mansfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin, eds., *Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Münster: Ugarit, 1995), 36–46. In the first example I will discuss (1.16.1.10), “1.16” refers to the third Kirta tablet, while “1.10” refers to column one, line ten.

³⁸This synopsis was adapted from Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Old Testament*

In doing a comparative analysis, the Epic of Kirta has several significant philological similarities to the pericope in Genesis (see table 1 below).³⁹ To begin, Kirta is specifically identified as a “son of El” (*bnm il*; cf. KTU 1.16.1.10), which is nearly identical to the “sons of Elohim” in Genesis 6:2 (*bn h’lhm*).⁴⁰ It is significant to note that “El” and “Elohim” are often interchangeable in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Gen. 21:33; Isa. 40:28) and can even designate human rulers (cf. Exod. 4:16).⁴¹ Thus, some interpreters translate the phrase as “sons of *the gods*,” which reflects the definite article present in the original Hebrew, in order to distinguish between Yahweh and the antediluvian kings (cf. Ps. 138:1b, “before the gods [*lhm*] I sing your praise”).⁴²

Victor Hamilton objects to this parallel and remarks that the change from a singular “son of God” to a plural “sons of God” is unjustifiable. He comments, “The major weakness is that while both within the OT and other ancient Near Eastern texts individual kings were called God’s son, there is no evidence that groups of kings were so styled.”⁴³ It is interesting to note that Ilumilki actually changes from the singular to the plural when describing Kirta as both a “son” and as a member of the “gods.” He writes, “Kirta is the *son* of [El], the offspring of the Gracious and Holy One. Do *gods* die?” (KTU 1.16.1.20–22, ital. mine).⁴⁴ Similarly, Haag explains that use of the word “son” (*bn*) in Ugaritic literature “is often used to denote membership in a group.”⁴⁵ This is especially true among certain social and professional cliques.⁴⁶ Even the singular form of Rephaim (*rp’*) in the Rephaim Tablets appear to refer to an assembly of plural divinities gathered under El.⁴⁷

Regardless, the nouns do not need to be morphologically exact in order for the parallelism to remain. The change from a singular “son” to the plural “sons” is merely a stylistic device that echoes the plural “daughters of man” in the same verse.⁴⁸ In fact, the Bible elsewhere interchanges between the singular and plural when referencing other Canaanite gods (cf. Judg. 3:7; 1 Kings 18:19). Adele Berlin explains that the interchange

Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East, 3rd ed. (New York: Paulist, 2006), 80–81.

³⁹ Interestingly, one commentator mistakenly writes that there are no parallels to the Genesis pericope in West Semitic literature; see Fretheim, *Genesis*, 1:382.

⁴⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all transliterations of the epic of Kirta appear in John C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1978), 82–102.

⁴¹ See A. J. Rosenberg, *Genesis: A New English Translation of the Text and Rashi, with a Commentary Digest* (New York: Judaica, 1993), 1:81–82.

⁴² See Meredith G. Kline, “Divine Kingship and Genesis 6:1–4,” *WTJ* 24, no. 2 (May 1962): 192 (brac. mine).

⁴³ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 264.

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Kirta are taken from Pardee, “Kirta Epic,” 1:333–43.

⁴⁵ Haag, “*ŋ bēn*,” 2:157.

⁴⁶ While Haag admits that the singular can refer to a collection of individuals, the author also notes that only the singular *bn* refers to ancient “heroes” in Ugaritic literature. Ultimately, Haag believes that the “sons of God” in Gen. 6:1–4 refers to a grouping of national demigods in the divine assembly; see Haag, “*ŋ bēn*,” 2:152–53, 157–59.

⁴⁷ L’Heureux, “Ugaritic and Biblical Rephaim,” 265–74.

⁴⁸ See Kline, “Divine Kingship,” 192, n. 17.

between singular and plural nouns is common in Hebrew parallelism (cf. Ps. 86:6; 144:10). The shift from singular to plural suggests that the two nouns, though oftentimes different, are linguistically equivalent.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, just because Ugaritic literature focuses on a single king as opposed to a group of kings does not prohibit the biblical writers from referencing a general collective for rhetorical purposes. This fits the context of the passage by diminishing the individual king's sin while emphasizing the communal spread of depravity. It is possible that the change also reflects a particular Hebraic usage of the same phrase that is similar to but distinct from the standard Ugaritic expression. In any case, neither the content nor the original referent changes by making the subject plural. It intimates the same thing since "son" and "sons" are conceptually identical.

Likewise, Ugaritic culture considered all of their kings to be a living representative of royal deities.⁵⁰ Ivan Engnell explains, "The special relationship of father-son between god and king is to be found again and again within the north-west Semitic area too, the king being directly called son of the god, and the god, father of the king."⁵¹ As Walton explains, it was not problematic for Israelites to ascribe the name "sons of God" to pagan rulers because it was a widespread title for kings who believed they were semi-divine.⁵²

There are other striking similarities between Kirta and Genesis 6:1–4. For instance, Genesis 6:2 and 4 state, "[T]he sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive ["beautiful," NIV; Heb. *tbt*]. And they took [*lqh*] as their wives any they chose . . . when the sons of God came in to the daughters of man and they bore [*yld*] children to them." While confronting King Pabil, Kirta demands possession of his daughter, "Give me maid [Hurriya], the best girl of your firstborn offspring" (KTU 1.14.3.39–40). Kirta then describes Hurriya's "beauty" (Ug. *tsm*, 1.14.3.42) and is promised that the "woman you take [*tqh*] will "bear" (Ug. *tld*) multiple sons (1.15.2.21–25). Note the parallels: Kirta, the "son of God," saw King Pabil's "daughter" (Ug. *bt*; Heb. *bt*) was "beautiful" (Ug. *tsm*; Heb. *tbt*) and "took" (Ug. *lqh*; Heb. *lqh*) her as his wife, who "bore" (Ug. *tld*; Heb. *yld*) him sons.⁵³ Both plotlines and terminologies are profoundly similar.

Genesis 6:3 then describes God's displeasure at the actions of the "sons of God" and identifies humanity as "mortal" (NIV [*bšr*]; "mortal flesh," REB). In response, Yahweh dramatically shortens humanity's lifespan and later threatens, "I will blot out man [*'dm*] whom I have created" (v. 7).⁵⁴ In the Ugaritic legend, Kirta also incurs divine displeasure with the goddess Asherah after taking Hurriya to be his wife. Here, Kirta breaks his vow

⁴⁹ Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 35, 44–45, 94, 140–141.

⁵⁰ Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 561.

⁵¹ Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 80.

⁵² Walton, "Sons of God," 188.

⁵³ Gibson transliterates the word "take" as *tqh*, while the Ugaritic word for "took" is *lqh*; cf. Gibson, *CML*, 91; Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, "תִּקְחֶה," in *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 1995), 2:534.

⁵⁴ For an explanation of the exegetical difficulties with Gen. 6:3 and a defense of the interpretation stated above, see Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 334–35.

to pay Asherah an increase in the bride price and receives a terminal illness that threatens to shorten his lifespan. One of his children asks, “Must you also, father, die like mortal men [*ik mtm*] . . . How can (that be when) they say: Kirta is the son of [El], the offspring of the Gracious and Holy One. Do gods die?” (KTU 1.16.1.3.20–22). Simon Parker notes that breaking a vow was a serious offense in the ancient Near East and would incur divine wrath.⁵⁵ While the texts use different words to describe the subject’s mortality (“flesh” [*bśr*] and “men” [*mtm*]), both texts parallel the same thematic consequence of divine wrath with a shortened lifespan.

It is also noteworthy that the Genesis account results in a divine punishment that affects the rest of humanity. This, too, has parallels in Kirta. As Clines notes, “In oriental ideology it is not uncommon to find the fate of the people at large bound up with the fate of the king.”⁵⁶ In this case, Genesis results in a flood that devastates the land (cf. Gen. 7:22), while Kirta’s illness results in the loss of water and food (KTU 1.16.3.1–16). Parker summarizes, “The king’s sickness has repercussions in the natural sphere, as is generally granted. Rain ceases, the food supplies are exhausted and there is no promise of a new harvest. Court, royal family and now land are bearing the consequences of the mortal sickness of their monarch.”⁵⁷

Though Genesis deals with a flood and Kirta describes a drought, the contrast is striking. Genesis notes, “All the fountains [*m’ynt*] of the great deep burst forth” (Gen. 7:11). In contrast, the Kirta poem states, “(Someone) saw the quaking of earth and heaven . . . of (its) well—watered portions [*miyt*]” (KTU 1.16.3.2,4), and then describes the people’s desire for rain (1.16.3.5–16). Watson and Wyatt explain that the people attempted to induce rainfall through “obscure ritual acts.” They comment, “We have here another expression of the ‘ideology of divine kingship’: the illness of the king induces a paralysis of Nature.”⁵⁸ Rather than a “paralysis” of rainfall, however, Genesis opposes the poem and unleashes torrents of water as its punishment, instead. Remarkably, both describe repercussions to the surrounding people through a natural disaster that affects the environment.

The final parallel between the Genesis pericope and Kirta is the relationship between the “Nephilim” (*nplm*), the “mighty men” (*gbbrm*), and the “sons of God” in 6:4. While grammarians continue to debate their origin and meaning, Ezekiel 32:27 may provide a concrete explanation. Here, the prophet describes a race of “mighty men” (*gbbrm*) who have “fallen” (*nplm*) in battle. Lamar Cooper acknowledges Ezekiel’s transliteration of the word “Nephilim” and comments, “These mighty warriors who had ‘fallen’ are an allusion to the mighty men of old described in Gen. 6:4 as Nephilim.”⁵⁹ Others also recognize the “Nephilim” as a race of warriors who have fallen heroically in battle.⁶⁰ Because they are merely humans, it is irrelevant whether the “Nephilim” and the “mighty

⁵⁵Simon B. Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aqhat*, SBLRBS 24 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 172–74.

⁵⁶Clines, “Significance,” 34; see also, Gibson, *CML*, 23.

⁵⁷Parker, *Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition*, 187.

⁵⁸Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 229 (see their entire discussion, 228–29).

⁵⁹Lamar Eugene Cooper, Sr., *Ezekiel*, NAC 17 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 289.

⁶⁰See Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm, “גִּילִים,” 2:709; Milton C. Fisher, “1393a,” in *TWOT* 2, ed. R. L. Harris *et al.* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 587.

men" are blood related to the "sons of God."⁶¹ What seems certain is the association of these warriors to violent behavior (Gen. 6:5–8).

Significantly, Kirta is also associated with a race of warriors called the "Rephaim." El states, "May Kirta be highly praised, in the midst of the Rephaim [*rpi*] of the underworld, in the assembly of Ditan's company" (KTU 1.15.3.13–15).⁶² Some scholars identify the "Rephaim" as a race of elite chariot warriors who were deified upon their death and whose military exploits fit the context of Kirta's recent military campaign (cf. Isa. 14:9).⁶³ As the Rephaim Tablets indicate, the earthly Rephaim were likely a patrician federation of warriors with El as their patron deity.⁶⁴ Strikingly, Hendel demonstrates that there is a connection between the "Nephilim" and the "Rephaim" by suggesting that the terms are interchangeable and synonymous. He notes the long tradition of identifying heroic warriors who permeated Ugaritic and Israelite culture.⁶⁵ Later Jewish scribes who were responsible for the Septuagint apparently believed the Nephilim and Rephaim were indistinguishable enough to use the same Greek term (*gigantes*) for both.⁶⁶ In this case, the connection between Kirta and the Genesis pericope is that the text associates the "son(s) of God" with the existence and progeny of violent warriors.

Table 1. Comparative Philology

Genesis 6:1–4; 7:11	Kirta
"sons of Elohim" <i>bn h'lm</i>	"son of El" <i>bnm il</i>
daughters of man were "beautiful" <i>tbt</i>	Hurriya "whose <i>beauty</i> is like that of [the goddess]" <i>tsm</i>
"they <i>took</i> as their wives" <i>lqh</i>	"[the] woman you <i>take</i> " <i>tqh/lqh</i>
daughter <i>bt</i>	daughter <i>bt</i>
bore <i>yld</i>	bore <i>tld</i>
Shortened Lifespan Gen. 6:3	Shortened Lifespan KTU 1.16.1.20–22
Nephilim <i>nplm</i>	Rephaim <i>rpi</i>
"all the <i>fountains</i> of the great deep burst forth" <i>m'ynt</i>	"the quaking of earth and heaven ... of (its) well-watered <i>portions</i> " <i>mlyt</i>

⁶¹See the discussion in Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 337–39.

⁶²English trans. provided by Michael D. Coogan, *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Sources for the Study of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford, 2013), 51. The term "Ditan" or "Ditanu" refers to a "prestigious tribal or dynastic name"; see Gibson, *CML*, 91, n. 8.

⁶³See Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 267–68.

⁶⁴L'Heureux, "Ugaritic and Biblical Rephaim," 265–74.

⁶⁵Hendel, "Demigods," 21–22.

⁶⁶Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1996), 198.

V. The Function of the “Sons of God” in Genesis 6:1–4

Apart from this pericope in particular, Ugaritic scholars have noted several literary parallels between Kirta and other portions of Genesis, as well.⁶⁷ Thus, it is no surprise that the Kirta poem also shares many similarities with Genesis 6:1–4. However, if Kirta is the appropriate paradigm for interpreting the pericope, then exegetes must reexamine the function of the “sons of God” within the literary context of Genesis.

1. Kirta’s Objective: Immortality

Interestingly, the biblical text does not explicitly condemn the marriages of the “sons of God” and the “daughters of men,” but it does reference their “mortal” nature (6:3) and specifically condemns the “intention of the thoughts of [humanity’s] heart” (v. 5). Using the Ugaritic legend as a paradigm, the story reveals that Kirta’s motivation for taking a wife, generating offspring, and seeking association with the Rephaim is to obtain immortality. By taking a wife and producing children, Kirta is able to “ensure the continuance of his name.”⁶⁸ Engnell explains that the Ugaritic belief system of marriage and reproduction reflected a form of rebirth for the king. A royal marriage ceremony reenacted the marriage between the Ugaritic gods of love and fertility, which reflected the king’s desire to be immortal. Once completed, the people officially recognized the king as a god. For Kirta, producing an heir meant the possibility of divine regeneration through the life of his son.⁶⁹ Gordon and Rendsburg remark, “The quest for immortality is realistically and completely solved through progeny.”⁷⁰

The same view of immortality was present in ancient Israelite religion, as well, where the majority of people understood children to be the attainment of eternal life.⁷¹ As Hans Schwarz summarizes regarding eschatology in the Hebrew Bible, “One continued to live on in one’s sons and through them in the community. It was one of the most devastating fates to die without a male heir, for then there was no hope.”⁷² The issue of having male successors was especially important to warriors, who were destined to endure the same ignoble or celebrated status in death that they acquired while still alive. Although, dead warriors with a dishonorable reputation were still able to share vicariously in the glory of their male offspring.⁷³

As the story of Kirta states, producing a male heir intricately relates to Kirta’s greatness as a king, “We rejoiced in your life, our father, we exulted (in) your

⁶⁷Cf. the numerous connections to Genesis in Parker, *Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition*, 94–95, 157–58, 166–71.

⁶⁸Gibson, *CML*, 23; see also, Craigie, *Ugarit*, 482–83.

⁶⁹Engnell, “Studies in Divine Kingship,” 91–95, 148–49, 152–53, 169; see also, Wolfram von Soden, *The Ancient Orient: An Introduction to the Study of the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 68.

⁷⁰Gordon and Rendsburg, *Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 317.

⁷¹Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 47; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 78–85.

⁷²Hans Schwarz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 36–37.

⁷³Bernstein, *Formation of Hell*, 30.

immortality" (KTU 1.16.1.14–15).⁷⁴ Marriage and reproduction allowed Kirta to become equal with other demigods and ancestors (Rephaim?) upon death.⁷⁵ However, his desire for immortality mandated a male heir. The funeral rites of ancient Ugarit required that the eldest son perform certain rituals to ensure his father's membership among the divine. If Kirta died without an heir, he would lose all possibility of becoming a deified member of the Rephaim and could no longer be involved in earthly affairs through his royal son.⁷⁶ As Baruch Levine and Jean-Michel de Tarragon writes, "He [Kirta] longs for a son who will attend him during his life, but who will no less emphatically, worship him after his death. . . 'one of the Rephaim' simply refers to the hero's career as one who was finally blessed with an heir, and was thereby assured of honor in the netherworld."⁷⁷ This search for immortality fits within the context of Genesis. With the exception of Enoch, Genesis highlights humanity's mortality alongside the deepening consequences of sin (chs. 3–6). Human demise is the central theme of the genealogies in Genesis leading up to the mention of the "sons of God."⁷⁸

2. The "Sons of God" as a Polemic against Royal Immortality

The story of Kirta's sickness reveals the contradiction of identifying Kirta as a "son of God" and his inability to extend his own life.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, belief in the immortality of Canaanite kings was commonplace in the ancient Near East and contradicted the revelation of Israel's God. If the basis of the Genesis pericope is, in fact, the Epic of Kirta (or a similar, pre-Ugaritic regional tradition), then it is possible the story acts as a polemic against the belief that divine kings obtained immortality through marriage and reproduction.⁸⁰ Throughout the ancient Near East, the standard conception of the cosmos was that only divine beings occupied the heavens, thereby forcing the gods to establish a permanent separation between earth and heaven. The ancient Israelites, however, went even further and concluded that not only are humans forbidden from transgressing the

⁷⁴English trans. provided by Gibson, *CML*, 95.

⁷⁵Simon B. Parker, "Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," *JBL* 95, no. 1 (March 1976): 26–28. Royal ancestors were often explicitly called "gods"; see Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 561.

⁷⁶See Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 210, n. 52, 212, n. 156; idem, "Word of Tree and Whisper of Stone: El's Oracle to King Keret (Kirta), and the Problem of the Mechanics of Its Utterance," *VT* 57 (2007): 494; Glenn S. Holland, *Gods in the Desert: Religions of the Ancient Near East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 241; Gordon and Rendsburg, *Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 90–91; Craigie, *Ugarit*, 482–83.

⁷⁷Baruch A. Levine and Jean-Michel de Tarragon, "Dead Kings and Rephaim: The Patrons of the Ugaritic Dynasty," *JAOS* 104, no. 4 (Oct.–Dec. 1984): 655.

⁷⁸Robert Gonzales Jr., "Where Sin Abounds: The Spread of Sin and the Curse in the Primeval History," *RBTR* 5, no. 1 (January 2008): 20–22, esp. 21, n. 58.

⁷⁹See Parker, *Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition*, 88–90, 213.

⁸⁰Ironically, one interpretive proposal of the Genesis pericope reverses this theory by situating the sin of Gen. 6:2 as a human attempt to achieve immortality through sex with divine beings; see VanGemeren, "Sons of God," 347. Also noteworthy is that some scholars argue that the Epic of Kirta is actually a comedic polemic against divine kingship, which parodies the role of sacral kings and ridicules their inept gods; see Watson and Wyatt, *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies*, 206–209; Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 177.

boundaries of the divine realm, but humans are also prevented from acquiring immortality on their own (Gen. 3:22). Therefore, it is possible that the Genesis pericope recasts the Kirta Epic in order to expose the futility of humanity attempting to disrupt the natural order of the universe, especially by supposedly divine warrior kings.⁸¹ As Wenham summarizes, “Intercourse with the divine was regularly sought in the fertility cults of Canaan and the sacred marriage rites of Mesopotamia. Through such procedures men sought to achieve enhanced earthly life and even eternal life. But to Hebrew thinking such ideas were utterly abhorrent.”⁸²

In discussing Gilgamesh’s search for immortality, Walton states, “[The Epic] demonstrates the frustration of kings—achieving the highest earthly power, yet subject to the common human destiny and indignity . . . Therefore, while immortality is a common concern of mankind, it is of particular interest to kings.”⁸³ Yet, despite these Canaanite beliefs, Genesis 6:1–4 reveals that Yahweh controls human mortality (v. 3). In a striking reversal of Ugaritic beliefs, the Israelite God demonstrates the finiteness of the god-kings and their inability to obtain immortality. Instead of life, God destroys their marriages, heirs, and even warrior companions.

Of course, critics of this interpretation could make the charge that the polemical nature of the pericope accuses the ancient Israelites of anachronistic storytelling. In other words, it appears that this interpretation replaces the antediluvian “sons of God” with the Late Bronze Age Ugaritic kings, who were separated from each other by several centuries. Since the “sons of God” died in the flood, and the Ugaritic kings were alive at the time of Moses after the flood, Genesis 6:1–4 could not be a polemic against ancient Ugarit. However, this charge would also have to dismiss the polemical nature of the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which subversively attack ancient Canaanite, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian religious beliefs. In fact, the Genesis creation account specifically parallels and demythologizes particular Ugaritic cosmological elements.⁸⁴

This contention must also recognize that the “sons of God” pericope merely associates the religious beliefs of the Ugaritic kings with that of the antediluvian world. Rather than being an anachronistic replacement, Genesis simply links the depravity of pre-flood civilizations with the cultic beliefs surrounding Israel. It corrects the abhorrent belief that marriage and reproduction produced immortality, which was so prolific among contemporary kings that the antediluvian rulers may have actually held the same beliefs. Like all the other religious principles surrounding Israel, Yahweh destroyed those who promoted these superstitions. Thus, the pericope warns Israel against embracing the

⁸¹Cf. Ronald A. Veenker, “Do Deities Deceive?,” in *Windows to the Ancient World of the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of Samuel Greengus*, ed. B. T. Arnold, N. L. Erickson, and J. H. Walton (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 206–10; and Moltmann, *Coming of God*, 94–95.

⁸²Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 146.

⁸³Walton, “Sons of God,” 201–202.

⁸⁴See Loren R. Fisher, “Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament,” *VT* 15, no. 3 (July 1965): 313–24; Ernest C. Lucas, “Cosmology,” in *DOT: Pentateuch*, ed. T. D. Alexander and D. W. Baker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 136–37; Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1–3: Part IV: The Theology of Genesis 1,” *BSac* 132, no. 528 (October 1975): 328–34; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 122–210; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1–73.

theologies of the ancient pagans, including Ugarit, through the example of a divine judgment carried out in the deluge.

Conclusion

In the end, the enigmatic nature of Genesis 6:1–4 requires examining parallel stories from the ancient Near East. Walton remarks, “In the case of this difficult passage, however, anything that even fits is worthy of consideration.”⁸⁵ In particular, interpreters should examine Ugaritic literature as a primary source of reference for understanding the Genesis pericope. Nonetheless, identifying Ugaritic literature as a primary source does not necessarily entail that Ugaritic religion was the originator of these primeval traditions. Rather, stories such as the Epic of Kirta may simply parallel a provincial narrative that had existed prior to its codification in the Kirta poem. In this case, the Genesis pericope could be responding to this larger tradition, which found a specific illustration in the extant tale from Ugarit.

Ultimately, through comparative studies, the Epic of Kirta appears to be a potential paradigm for understanding the function of the “sons of God,” who may have represented the actions of god-kings attempting to achieve immortality through marriage and reproduction. Whereas the Ugaritic legends grant the king divine longevity, the Genesis pericope challenges this by destroying all royal dynasties. Thus, as a polemic, the sin of the “sons of God” was not unsanctioned marriages, adultery, polygamy, or rape. Instead, Genesis 6:1–4 may have attempted to eliminate the concept that humans, especially Canaanite kings, are capable of achieving immortality. As the “sons of God” seek everlasting life through marriage and reproduction, Yahweh limits their lifespans and proves capable of hindering their objectives through the emergence of a flood.

⁸⁵Walton, “Sons of God,” 204.